

Reflections on Prostitution Sting

February, 2015

It's been almost one week and I'm avoiding it. I'm avoiding trying to summarize last Monday night's experience. I was invited by a local sergeant to join and observe one of their prostitution stings. He values our partnership and thought it would be useful for me to see how it works so that all parts of our team know what the others are doing. It is progress to even hear this language reflecting his change of mindset and the organic response team formed amongst several police departments in the Lehigh Valley, PA.

The experience began as I was greeted by one of the cops and taken to the meeting room. As we went back there, he mentioned his knowledge of the work that VAST does. *"These girls are pretty messed up. They need a lot of help."* I agreed and resonated with his statement. Walking into a room with almost 20 cops at the station, representing 9 local enforcement departments, was probably the most intimidating aspect. The Sergeant led this introductory meeting, explaining the operation and each person's role. We then transported to the hotel to set up. There were 3 adjacent rooms, designated as the undercover, surveillance and arrest rooms. I spent time in the surveillance room.

There were approximately 4 undercover cops (2 female and 2 male) who were texting and calling in response to Backpage ads. There were at least 2 computers in the room set up viewing Backpage ads and dozens of printed Backpage ads. These cops divided the ads into regions. They were looking for "outcalls", or females who would come to the hotel room.

Earlier that day they had set up their own backpage ad and the 2 undercover female cops were responding to the calls and texts for this ad. It did not take long to realize. **I was watching with Him.** This is an expression that comes from Jesus' warning and command to the disciples on 3 occasions during his time of praying in the Garden. He asked the disciples to **watch with Him** as He prayed. **Watching with Him** is important. Instead, the disciples slept. They missed this important command and invitation to join Jesus as He prayed, as He wept, as He prepared to take on evil and suffering and the wrath of His Father, being separated from Him as He fulfilled His mission of atonement. We **watch with Him** as we join Him in suffering, in work that involves the darkness of evil. Watching teaches us and will change us. Within moments of being planted in this hotel room with over a dozen cops, I was **watching with Him** and felt like I was sitting in the sewage of sin.

Initially, it was almost too overwhelming. The calls were coming in quickly and it was before 4:00 pm. We were operating until 11. What did I expect? I don't know. Maybe I did not prepare myself for what to expect. **I watched** and could hear the undercover cops and their responses. At times, I could hear the requests, some odd or disturbing, from the Johns. I witnessed how they did not seem to hesitate when given an average quote of \$100-200/hour. I could hear the comments of the cops, revealing varying levels of understanding and of course their own self-preservation tools for this work. Everywhere I looked I saw and **I watched** images of women, accompanied by alluring sexual phrases. The images included all ages, races, shapes and sizes...all advertising their bodies as a commodity. I can't disconnect from the statistics I know and the women I know...who of these bodies belonged to a woman who was being trafficked? Who of these women includes the nearly 90% with a history of childhood sexual abuse? Who was introduced to this exploitation at the age of 13? Where were they from? Who sees them?!

It seemed like minutes from arriving that the first "John" was on his way. One of the female cops responding to the calls was luring him into the room. Upon his arrival, the other was in the "undercover room," and prepared for his arrival. Several of us **watched** from a camera in the adjacent room while 3 cops stood by the door waiting for the arranged signal (throwing a towel on the bed) to enter and make their arrest. We could not hear the conversation but could only speculate. As soon as money was exchanged, the towel was thrown on the bed, signifying ready for police entry. Each time the cops stormed through the door, usually yelling "police!" with some type of added obscenity to enhance the delivery. Each time they were rough in making their arrest, which even led some of the undercover cops to question the necessity of this violent approach.

The men had varying reactions but most of them seemed stunned—shocked that their fantasy was being interrupted. One wet himself, another defecated. Their ages ranged from 20's to approximately 60's. Their backgrounds also varied

but included 2 university faculty or administration, a doctor, a theological studies student. Another John claimed to be an adjunct professor at a local university. He had no money, only gloves and a pocketknife. His story included the explanation that he was doing research on women entrapped in prostitution or sex trafficking. He states he simply responds to ads to come out and talk with the women, hoping to develop a relationship with them and eventually offer support. While we found an online bio of him, the university he claimed was employing him knew nothing of this guy. His smug attitude, his detached affect and his overall countenance instinctually put all of us on edge that this guy was much more and different than what he claimed.

After each John was put in handcuffs, ***I watched*** as they came through our room and were taken to the arrest room for questioning and further investigation. At times they were coming through so quickly that one needed to wait in our room until the arrest room was cleared. Of course this meant sitting directly across from men in handcuffs... ***I watched***, having an upclose and personal view of the profile of a Lehigh Valley John. My reactions varied from pity, sadness, sympathy, anger, disbelief, disturbed and probably some disgust if I am honest. Demand: the fuel for the commercial sex industry and therefore, fuel for continued exploitation.

Only two female prostitutes came during the operation. The cops wondered if this was related to it being a Monday night after Valentine's weekend ("*They are tired from a busy weekend...*," they half-joked about a serious reality.) and said it is also becoming increasingly difficult to find women who will respond to outcalls. ***I watched*** as she initially came through the door from the undercover room. ***I watched*** as the cops made remarks and jokes about her and her appearance. I then had the opportunity to speak with her. After she was taken into the arrest room, they brought her back into the surveillance room, so that the arrest room could be used for another woman who had come in. The first woman had been dropped off by a friend. It was clear she was high and she carried a crack pipe hidden in a cigarette box.

As the female homeland security agent spoke with her, she asked me to join. Eventually the agent was called into another interview which gave a long period of time for me to talk with this girl. She sat on the toilet and I sat on the edge of the bathtub in the small hotel bathroom. ***I watched*** as she cried, continually blowing her nose, and talking incessantly. One of the first things she said to me after the agent left was: "I'm sorry" with tears rolling down her face. I asked why she is sorry and she said "I just hate when people look at you and they know what you do..." And she went on to describe all the shame she carries for things that have happened to her, choices she has made...She didn't use the word shame until I named it for her, but she then quickly agreed that this was her experience. She described shame for what had happened that evening. If she saw or anticipated someone new was coming into the room she would cower and hide under the hood of her shirt.

As she unraveled sheet after sheet of toilet paper to blow her nose between incessant tears, she shared more of her story. She is 30 years old. She has two kids who are living with her mother. Her drug use over the last 10 years has hindered her from caring for them. She admits to ongoing difficulty trying to end drug use. She has a culinary degree from a University. Her story was intermingled with wishes, goals, misplaced dreams...about working in a catering job, of having her kids again....but she continually circled around again to the idea that she would leave tonight and return to getting high. "I'm going to be honest with you. I can't wait to leave here and get high. This is all I can think about."

Yet in this interaction, it wasn't all she was thinking about. She laughed as she observed how much she was talking. "I never get to talk to a female like this." She showed me a thumbprint necklace that was her deceased grandmother. She shared this after I asked her if there was anyone in her life that she could trust. She cried as she grieved for her and the role she played in her life. This grandmother also introduced her to spiritual things. With disappointment, she talked about her history within the church and said "I used to be a Sunday school teacher..." Her grandmother was the only stability in her family. She admits "I just want to go home, but I can't. It's just not healthy." Similar to the backgrounds of many women who are prostitutes or human sex trafficking survivors, she describes a childhood of instability, a broken home and sexual abuse.

With disappointment, she talked about how today was a first time in a long time that she had cared for herself. She sold half the drugs she had so that she could buy some underwear, basic clothing and toiletries. She said she had taken a shower and painted her nails. She had eaten a cinnamon roll and this was the first thing in 2 days. I felt helpless,

powerless...not knowing if or how to offer more. What was my role this evening? All I knew is that I came to **watch with Him** and these interactions would inform our future work.

It's difficult to recount all aspects of our long, winding conversation. Yet, the themes included shame, disappointment in dashed goals and dreams and me offering hope and choices. This was my goal. To remind her of the value in her humanity, the choices she may not see or recognize and the hope of change, primarily in Jesus Christ, whom she knew of since childhood. She seemed doubtful that there was any hope for her. I offered options of support and resources and yet was thankful that she was honest with her intent to continue to use. We did exchange numbers and she said "If it's OK, I may need to call you even before I am ready for help and change." I wholeheartedly agreed and encouraged her to reach out. I have no idea if I will ever see or talk with this young woman again. I had this brief encounter to repeatedly remind her of her worth, her value, her purpose for life, and her *choices*. I was **watching with Him** and representing Him. And then **I watched with Him** as she walked out the door again, to interact with the same people and go get high as she promised she would.

During our interaction she thanked me for the way I was treating her. It seemed to be set apart from the others, including one of the cops who typically focuses on drug investigation. **I watched** as he took her phone and used his power to ask questions about who was in it. He mentioned one name, asking her about an obviously well-known drug dealer. He asked her to call this guy and have him bring drugs to the hotel, saying that her male friend, currently in the arrest room, wanted it. She became tearful and clearly did not want to do this. She kept saying things like "I'm not stupid. I know what you are doing." And "I just don't feel safe right now....can my friend come and pick me up now?" Thankfully the female agent intervened and deescalated the situation. She reminded her of the agreement that they had made, and was clearly trying to preserve the trust and safety between them for future interaction (both in efforts to get her help but also receive potentially beneficial information from her for various cases.) This interaction was representative of the need for trauma-informed training for cops. It is not necessary, beneficial or just for them to be interrogated with the same approach for criminals. Frankly, it seemed inhumane.

At one point, this same cop came back into the surveillance room from the arrest room after interviewing the second female. He loudly exclaimed "It's a good thing these girls do what they do because they couldn't do anything else!" The weight and focus of the room seemed to shift to me, looking for my reaction. One of the guys said "Do you need some sensitivity training?" I decided to acknowledge the comment but in a way that would ease the tension. "Yeah, do you want me to start the training right now?"

The room obviously varied in degree of training, understanding and perception. On the opposite end, was an undercover cop who has worked with several of the same women we have encountered. He shared how he received training from the Homeland Security agent. He admitted initially he was skeptical, but he soon realized he was working on what seemed to be a drug case, with 4 women who had been trafficked by their drug dealer. He reached out to her and admitted he was "in over his head" and asked for her help. Since then, they continue to partner closely together. I know firsthand, that behind the tough exterior is a guy who genuinely cares for these girls. More than one has spoken highly of him, and they clearly feel safe to reach out to him, to open up to him, one crediting him for "saving her life." Unfortunately, this same girl is in critical condition due to a drug overdose. When I told him that she has told me this he said "Yeah, saved her life just so she could go and destroy it." It was a privilege to meet with him and to take the time to recount with him and the Homeland Security agent the status of several women that we have helped. Some of them we cannot locate, others are struggling in the life, and some have been helped and though facing obstacles, are moving forward towards recovery. He told the story of one young woman who took the time to reach out time long after they met. He said she was 80 pounds when they first met her and they did not expect her to survive. Her email was one where she thanked him for his impact on her life and the changes she has made. In spite of his cop exterior, it was evident this made an impression on him.

This same cop quietly expressed some disapproval for the overall demeanor and approach of some of the guys. Yet, he also expressed some sympathy for the Johns. "They don't need to be treated this way...these guys are just here to get blow jobs." How to respond to this statement that seems to sympathize with the men who are buying women as if they are a pleasure commodity? I didn't. This time I was there just **to watch**. I know this guy has a growing understanding of victimization of women in prostitution. I know he prioritizes finding the traffickers. Yet, this statement reflected still a

greater sympathy or grace for the men who fuel the commercial sex industry and therefore are *participants* in the exploitation.

But I leave feeling thankful. I am thankful for the opportunity. I am appreciative of this type of coordinated effort in our area. I am grateful for the sergeant who oversaw this operation, is spreading his influence and has a burden for additional training. He called the next day to process the evening and extend his apologies. He said he was disappointed with how it went and seemed concerned at my response to it, based on things he heard were said throughout the operation, the lack of females that were identified, the coordination that he viewed as too large with individuals that were new to these operations, etc. He reiterated the need for additional training. I took the time to ask him how he and the other cops care for themselves in this line of work. He said he didn't think this was his main concern. His main priority was additional training of the victimization in prostitution and the need to prioritize caring for them and identifying their traffickers. I'm grateful for a man who has this influence and who is providing women with *choice*. I'm grateful for an opportunity to ***watch with Him***. I hope that I saw it with His eyes and that I don't miss the lessons He has for me, my work, and His people.